First Steps Towards Successful Group Activities

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Introduction

The use in education of small groups of two to four members receives substantial support from both theory and research (e.g., (Deutsch, 1949, 1962; Gillies, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 2006; Lewin, 1935; Sharan, 1999; Slavin, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978, Webb, et al., 2009). This theory and research suggests that people learn more and gain affective benefits when they spend some time collaborating with others. However, in the author's experience, workshop facilitators and other educators are often reluctant to ask participants to form small groups and to participate in small group activities, especially when participants have not met each other or for whatever reason may be uncomfortable interacting with one another. Thus, workshop facilitators and other educators may hesitate to use small group activities. This paper proposes a wide variety of ideas that educators can try to increase people's willingness to form groups and participate in group activities. These ideas are divided into three groups: before the event, at the beginning of the event and at the end of the event and beyond.

Ideas for Before the Event

This section of the paper offers ideas for what can be done before the event to increase participants' willingness to collaborate with peers. In the author's experience, most people do want to interact with others, but they may be reluctant to take the first step.

1. Facilitators can let participants know ahead of time that this will be an interactive session in which they will be asked to discuss with other participants. If the plan is to form mixed groups (e.g., mixed as to female/male, workplace or educational institution, age, knowledge of the workshop topic), this should also be stated, such as telling participants that they may be placed in groups with people whom they did not know previously.

2. If facilitators know who will be attending, they can consider forming groups ahead of time. These might be heterogeneous groups that mix participants on different variables, or matching them on one or more factors, e.g., grouping teachers of the same subjects or of the same age groups.

3. Facilitators can arrange the furniture to facilitate groups, e.g., instead of each chair being separate from the others, chairs can be arranged in groups of four.

4. If an auditorium seats 300 people, but only 100 are expected, tape and/or signage can be used to encourage participants to sit in the front one-third of the auditorium.

5. Shortly before the event begins, facilitators should be in the room to encourage people to sit together, rather than scattering themselves in isolated pockets.

6. Before the workshop starts, facilitators can try to spend time chatting with participants. This will create a friendly atmosphere, which in turn encourages participants to interact.

7. Background music can be played before the event begins to encourage an atmosphere similar to that of a café, in which people may feel relaxed and more willing to talk.

8. Facilitators can give each person that enters a card or a picture, e.g., some people's card has the name of an animal, while others' cards have pictures of animals. When the event begins, participants will form groups by finding the matching cards, e.g., the person whose cards has the word "tiger" forms a group of two with the person whose card has the picture of a tiger. Something similar can be done to form groups of three or four.

At the Beginning of the Event

This section of the paper offers ideas for what can be done at the beginning of the event to increase participants' willingness to collaborate with peers. The activities suggested in this section do take time, but it will be time well spent if the activities promote peer interaction.

1. Facilitators explain to participants why group activities will be a significant mode of instruction. Reasons can flow from theory, research, personal experience inside and outside of education and third person examples, such as stories of sports team, dance troupes and musical groups, and quotes from famous people. Also, participants can share their own experiences with groups.

2. Tongue twisters can be used to start people talking (Reyes, 1989). This should not be a competition, e.g., to see who says the tongue twisters the fastest or the more accurately. The internet has many collections of tongue twisters. Here is a tongue twister that works on the "th" sound: "These threes were thrown from those thin thornberry trees".

3. Guidance to public speakers often suggests beginning with a joke to lighten the mode in the room (e.g., Neumann, Hood, & Neumann, 2009). The internet offers millions of jokes on a wide range of topics.

4. Another way to promote laughter is via laughter exercise, also known as laughter yoga (Lyle, 2014). Youtube offers many videos explaining this idea and suggesting how it can be done (e.g., BBC, 2006). A key claim made by proponents of these laughter exercises is that people benefit from laughter physiologically and psychologically even if they are pretending to laugh.

5. A quiz on background information related to the workshop topic gives group members something to talk about at the same time it helps participants recall and increase their store of information that will be of use during the workshop. Each group member should have a turn to answer one question or to explore one option in an MCQ. Easy quiz questions boost participants' confidence in themselves and in their partners.

6. Similarly, riddles and mind games/puzzles start participants thinking and sharing their thoughts. Again, facilitators should encourage interaction and turn taking, e.g., by

timing how long each person speaks or writes before giving up the turn or by allotting time for each person to think (perhaps by writing) before sharing with partner(s).

7. Participants can exchange information, i.e., set up an information gap in which each person has information which their partner(s) need. For example, at the beginning of an event, such as a conference, participants can tell each other why they decided to attend the event, or why they decided to attend this particular session. If the event has been going on for a while, partners can share one useful point they have learned or one particularly good presentation they attended and one point that stood out in that presentation.

8. Another information gap activity is "A Surprising Fact about Me" (Jacobs, Renandya, & Power, in press). Here, group members take turns to tell something about themselves, and groupmates show interest by asking questions.

9. The internet is replete with suggestions for ice breakers. Facilitators need to find ones that work for them and are likely to work for their learners.

Encouraging Interaction at the End of Workshops and Beyond

Too often, sessions end with facilitators asking, "Any questions?". Unifortunately, this earnest question often elicits no questions, and, furthermore, asking "Any questions?" promotes interaction only between facilitators and participants, but not among participants. This section of the paper suggests alternatives for generating learning and engagement at the end of the session, as well as into the future.

1. Facilitators can ask questions. Polling software, such as Socrative (MasteryConnect, 2015), can be used in groups, e.g., groups discuss the facilitators' questions before entering their responses via the software.

2. Participants can take turns to reflect on the event within their groups, e.g., they can reflect on:
   a. one point they learned
   b. something they will use after the workshop
   c. a disagreement or concern they have
   d. something they did not understand or want to know more about.

3. After these reflections have been discussed with groupmates, they can be shared with the facilitators and other participants.

4. Facilitators can provide ways for participants to continue to share questions, ideas and experiences via email, Whatsapp, Facebook, etc.

5. If participants individually contact the facilitators, e.g., via email, when responding, facilitators can share their responses with all participants. This can be done without mentioning the name of the participant who initiated the discussion. Facilitators can

also do this sharing with points raised by individuals or individual groups during the workshop.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present paper has provided guidance to workshop facilitators and others who might want to use group activities but may be reluctant to do so. This advice was divided into three phases of workshop planning and implementation: before the workshop, at the beginning of the workshop and at the end of the workshop and beyond. The literature cited in the introduction of this paper provides a strong rationale for the use of group activities for both cognitive and affective reasons.

Furthermore, the readers of this paper have no doubt experienced the importance of peer cooperation in many areas of their own lives, although perhaps this experience may have more often been with a lack of cooperation rather than with the presence of cooperation. Areas of life in which peer cooperation is essential include sports, music, dance, families, friendships, organisations and, indeed, almost every area of human endeavour. Thus, the hope is that not only will workshops in which peer cooperation plays a major role be more successful workshops but that the experiences of successful peer interaction during the workshops will lead participants to strive for more such experiences elsewhere in their lives.

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